The US imperial leadership culture, embodied by President Biden clinging on to power and former President Trump’s abuse of it, risks damaging American democracy.

The US presidential election debate has delivered its verdict, produced new insights and raised new questions. The question we focus on here is why the richest country on earth has presented its voters with such poor options, and how the race to the White House has exposed the country’s democratic vulnerability.

On the Republican side, we have Donald Trump, a convicted felon who was a disruptive, divisive force as President from 2017 to 2021. On the Democratic side, we have incumbent President Joe Biden, an ageing man no longer able to perform the job at the level it requires – clearly evidenced by his disastrous debate performance – even though his first term is considered by many to be successful.

We believe that the problem lies not with those two individuals but the pernicious riskiness of America’s culture of authority, epitomised by the
presidency and the near imperial power that comes with it. It is completely at odds with good democratic governance. Both candidates now risk dragging their parties, their country and the world into dangerous territory that good governance should have avoided.

**The cult of the CEO**

One simple explanation of why the Trump cult has gone on for so long lies in the CEO cult prevailing in the US. The CEO is not just an executive but a chief, sometimes emperor, too often enjoying unitary and absolute authority.

One might in fact call US politics a CEO-cracy, where the CEO governs himself or herself once elected. This may resemble corporate America where the CEO also functions as the chair of the Board of Directors. The difference is corporate shareholders often have more options than voters in a presidential election.

What's more, the rules of the corporate game are not as lenient as they seem to be for the chief executive of the country. If the Supreme Court handpicked by Trump had its way, it would replace the Senate as the ultimate judge of presidential accountability.

Trump has assembled around him disparate groups of people, including traditional Republicans, evangelicals, US-type Trotskyists like Steve Bannon and wealthy donors with private agendas, many of which are laid out in *Project 2025*, a collection of conservative policy proposals. They are “all-in with Trump” because he is the only person able to carry their ad-hoc coalition across the finishing line. He is their perfect leader, diverting the public’s attention from the discord among them to his person, promoting populist and typically false statements from each group that exploit the fears and needs of the media and voters.

In the forum that revolves around Trump, there is no room for policy or substance. The scarecrow of the deep state, resurgence of the radical left and communism suffices to rally his base behind him.
Trump has cut the Grand Old Party from its traditional roots and turned it into the opposite of what it was under Abraham Lincoln – a party of principles, family and values no more, but a sect worshipping a four-letter word, MAGA (Make America Great Again). It has become a party that uses fascist intimidation tactics, including public ad hominem attacks (“lock her up” being a famous one) and unacceptable violence (of which the attack on the Capitol on Jan 6, 2021 is the most extreme).

The American CEO-cracy

The CEO-cracy stems from a fundamental governance issue at the top of America. It is a vulnerability for American democracy. Like Trump, Biden too is a beneficiary of the CEO-cracy. If his abysmal performance during the debate laid bare the weakness of the system, the reaction in the Democratic camp – “the position is his, to give or to keep” – waves red flags for US governance and its electoral process.

Why should Biden, who has said after the debate he’s not quitting, be allowed to decide whether to remain in the race or not? Why have the President’s advisers and those close to him in the party kept the fact that he’s unfit to rule from everyone? And for how long? Were they unaware of his lack of fitness or did they conceal it, thinking they could pull off a second Biden term?

More importantly, why do they continue to reassure everyone that their candidate will be up to a second term, which he would presumably finish at the age of 86? Why are the wagons circling around Biden, offering him tight protection against demands to step down? Does the Democratic leadership not see that they are resorting to the lies they accuse Republicans of? Does the body politic not realise that this corrosive culture will ultimately play to the advantage of extremist forces, to the detriment of the country?

All these questions are troubling, not simply from the perspective of the suitability of Biden or Trump for the job, but from the perspective of why their advisers, parties and ultimately, voters allow them to make the final decision on whether they are fit for purpose. Shouldn’t the final decision lie
with their parties? Are the parties not meant to serve the people, as the US Constitution states, “towards a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, and ... promote the general welfare”?

The more pressing issue for Democrats is the debate fallout’s damage to the higher moral ground Biden is campaigning on. “We know who the other guy is, for better or for worse,” Biden has said of Trump.

But we thought we knew Biden! He is now turning imperial. Even if he saved the nation from tyranny and lies four years ago, like an ageing Napoleon, he is no longer the best general to lead his camp against the other side.

**A great democratic moment?**

The US Constitution was built for an enlightened and well-meaning dictator, where he (so far it has always been a “he”) is the Emperor of the United States of America. He and only he ultimately decides what is best for the country. Even the Supreme Court appears to be happy to endorse this non-democratic principle.

The puzzle is why US political parties lack the ability to decide what, or perhaps who, is better for the country and has a better chance to be elected. In Trump’s case, the answer lies in the fact that he is the only viable frontman for a ragtag coalition. In Biden’s case, the answer lies fully in the CEO-cracy culture governing US politics, the presidents themselves and their courts.

The US is now facing a succession debacle similar to that of dictatorial regimes. The most important insight from the Biden-Trump debate may be that the country, as a democracy, needs to improve its governance at the top, for itself as well as the world. If that upgrade is the outcome, the debate will be forever known as a great democratic moment.

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